Beyond Good and Evil: Moral Ambiguity in the Graphic Novels of Alan Moore and Frank Miller

Synopsis Submitted to

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Introduction

Righteousness has always been a matter of grave importance for humans. Humankind has consciously chosen to be ethical in order to become acceptable to one another. When it comes to morality, everyone has their own idea of what is morally right. One person's moral compass could be broader or narrower than the other's. Nevertheless, there are a few actions which have been considered morally unacceptable by most number of people. For instance, many people believe that actions like killing another human or stealing from someone are morally wrong and therefore must be condemned. However, not every action humans take ensures moral clarity. Occasionally, human actions are centred around the area of moral greyness. This Grey area implies that the action taken was neither right nor wrong. Under these circumstances, the conventional standards of morality fail to determine the nature of human actions as whether right or wrong. Such actions could be called morally ambiguous.

There are two primary outlooks on morality. Moral Realism, being one of them, believes in the objective existence of morality independent of manifold opinions. Moral Relativism, on the other hand, emphasizes the subjectivist nature of morality. For instance, in some cultures animal killings are not only justified but they are a crucial part of their everyday lives. Thus, consuming meat is not considered an immoral activity in these cultures. While in some cultures, killing animals to consume their meat is as grave a sin as killing humans. Such nuances are of utmost interest to cultural relativists.

There is a debate among scholars regarding the use of the term ethics and morality interchangeably. There is a group of scholars who have distinguished ethics from morality. According to these scholars ethics are a set of rules imposed upon an individual by an external entity like religion or law, whereas, morality is an individual's personal code of conduct.

Graphic Novel is a comparatively more recent form of storytelling. It has been widely accepted and appreciated by academicians throughout the world. Graphic novels are often confused with comic books. There are a few scholars who strongly reject any distinction between comic books and graphic novels. However, some scholars have argued in favour of graphic novels as a form independent of comic books. They maintain that graphic novels focus on stories which have a proper beginning, a middle, and an end. Comic books on the other hand focus on

several shorter stories which are serialised. Stories in the comics are usually, if not always, lighter in tone, whereas, graphic novels deal with relatively more intense plot. Despite the difference in opinion, a large number of readers do not bother to distinguish. Most graphic novel writers are known primarily as comic book writers. Alan Moore and Frank Miller are no different in this matter. Arguably, they are two of the most read comic book writers. They revolutionized comic books and popularised graphic novels as a form with potential.

In the world of storytelling, right from its inception, morally clear protagonists dominated the scene for a very long period. Their actions were noble and they possessed all the qualities of a morally superior person. These characters were often monotonous and predictable. However, the picture is rapidly changing lately. Characters are not merely the agents who carry out the plot. Instead, characters are the plot. In such character-driven stories, the conflict arises within the characters and any action occurring in the plot is, either directly or indirectly, the product of this internal conflict.

Greater emphasis on characters rather than plot has changed the stories of the day. Moral clarity in the protagonist is not the quintessential mark of a lovable character. Humans have started celebrating the moral imperfections in fictional characters. Present day protagonists are not heroes conventionally. Such characters cannot even be called villains because the sum of their actions transcends the

parameters of moral judgement. These complex characters are loved and cherished by people because they represent the realer side of humanity. Humans cannot always be morally right even with the best of their intentions. This relativist morality has found its place in today's storytelling and is an essential part of most stories regardless of the form or medium of storytelling.

Statement of the Problem

When literary works are analysed through the lens of moral philosophy, the emphasis is on the dualistic nature of morality which makes a clear distinction between good and evil. Such studies often analyse the literary texts in a monochromatic manner and fail to acknowledge the complexities of moral judgements. Characters in such studies are simplistically characterised either as good human beings as bad human beings. Characters in moral dilemma fail to find a place in this rigid division of morality, which does not go beyond good and evil.

Review of Literature

In 'A fistful of dead roses…'. Comics as cultural resistance: Alan Moore and David Lloyd's *V for Vendetta*, the political subtext of the graphic novel *V for Vendetta* has been studied extensively.

Lorena O'English, J Gregory Matthews, and Elizabeth Blakesley Lindsay in their article "Graphic novels in academic libraries: From Maus to manga and beyond" have stressed the importance of graphic novels in the academic sphere and the growing popularity of the form among scholars. The study gathered the attention of the academia and more studies on the similar lines started emerging. Alan Moore and Frank Miller are the the forefathers of the graphic novel. Numerous studies have been conducted on their works.

In Terrence R Wandtke's "Frank Miller Strikes Again and Batman Becomes a Postmodern Anti-Hero: The Tragi (Comic) Reformulation of the Dark Knight", Batman's antiheroic side has been emphasised. This in some way hints at the moral ambiguity of his character, though doesn't keep morality at the centre of the analysis.

Peregrine Dace's "Nietzsche contra superman: An examination of the work of Frank Miller" investigates the work of Frank Miller, particularly his *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns*, in light of Nietzschean philosophy. Batman's attempts to control his environment and maintain the social order have been highlighted here.

In *Watchmen and Philosophy*, ethical issues faced by the characters are analysed from a philosophical lens. The book also tries to establish Alan Moore as a quintessential graphic novel writer.

The graphic novels selected for the study have complex characters and extreme situations. Thus, ethical conflicts depicted in these novels have been acknowledged by most scholars, yet not studied to a detailed degree. Available literature on the concerned works focuses greatly on the pop-cultural implications of these works.

Objectives of the Study

The proposed study takes four graphic novels as primary sources. *V for Vendetta*, and *Watchmen* by Alan Moore, and *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns* and *Batman: Year One* by Frank Miller are the four graphic novels under study. Moral ambiguity in the selected graphic novels will be the focus of the study.

The proposed study aims to analyse these novels through the lens of moral ambiguity. The study will attempt to conceptualize moral ambiguity. It will also investigate the causes of the shift in storytelling from heroism to anti-heroism.

Research Methodology

Graphic novel is essentially a postmodern invention. Therefore, postmodernist narratology will be applied to the graphic novels under study. Characters in the selected graphic novels will be deconstructed and the issues

regarding ethicality will be analysed based on their responses to various situations. Objective view on morality will be discarded and the prime attention will be given to the relativist view on morality.

Significance of the Study

Due to the complexities of the postmodern life, morality, too, has become a complex phenomenon. This complexity has become an integral part of today's storytelling. When it comes to the study of moral philosophy, the usual focus is on the conflict between two polar extremes of the moral compass, i.e. good versus evil. The study proposes a more well-rounded perspective where the dualistic view on morality will be challenged by analysing select graphic novels of two prominent graphic novel writers. Therefore, the proposed study is significant from both literary and philosophical standpoints.

Tentative Chapter Scheme

Chapter 1. Introduction

In the introductory chapter the required knowledge to understand the thesis will be provided. It will provide the rationale behind the study. Objectives of the

study will be discussed in detail. Graphic novel as a literary form will be explained in detail.

Chapter 2. Moral Ambiguity- Conceptual Framework

In this chapter, moral ambiguity will be conceptualised by taking into account various scholarly views on morality.

Chapter 3. Morally clear to Morally Ambiguous: The Rise of the Anti-Hero

In this chapter, the shift from heroism to anti-heroism will be studied. It will study the change in storytelling and the causes of the shift. Popular stories from various storytelling forms will be taken into consideration and exemplified.

Chapter 4. Moral ambiguity in Alan Moore's *Watchmen*, and *V for Vendetta*

Moral ambiguity in Alan Moore's *Watchmen*, and *V for Vendetta* will be analysed based on the conceptual framework formed.

Chapter 5. Moral Ambiguity in Frank Miller's *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns*, and *Batman: Year One*

Moral ambiguity in Frank Miller's *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns*, and *Batman: Year One* be analysed based on the conceptual framework formed.

Chapter 6. Conclusion

Findings of the study will be presented in this chapter and a conclusion will be provided. Scope for further study will also be discussed.

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